

ACT defusion techniques

Sometimes we struggle with 'negative thoughts'. Often, we're told to 'think positive', 'challenge thoughts' or 'try not to think about it'. Sometimes this can work! However, we might sometimes become locked in a loop of trying to feel better despite being trapped by the thoughts.

But who told you the thought was negative? When we identify a thought as negative, we have a natural desire to get rid of it. But in truth, our thoughts are neither positive nor negative, but can be either helpful or unhelpful. When we can get enough distance from our minds we can make decisions to pay attention to what's helpful, while ignoring thoughts if they are unhelpful.

Defusion helps you look AT the thought, instead of trying to look FROM the thought. Applying cognitive defusion techniques helps develop psychological flexibility by identifying unhelpful thoughts and being able to see them merely as 'words inside your head'.

The purpose of these techniques is not to undermine what goes on in your mind, or to force you to be positive. But to create some distance between you and your thoughts. This will allow you to devote more time to your values and what is important to you. This does take practice, but if we want to do something 'right' we have to be prepared to do it wrong first. If your brain has immediately said 'this won't work'...well thank your brain for that, and defuse that thought too!

Defusion techniques

Mental language

What might be a typical negative thought you have about yourself? Got one? For example:

'I'm not good enough'

How do you feel when you think about that statement? Notice what happens if you get into the habit of adding 'I'm having the thought' in front of the thought:

'I'm having the thought I'm not good enough'.

You're not trying to change the thought, or challenge it, or control or argue with it. Maybe add 'I'm noticing in front of that:

'I'm noticing I'm having the thought I'm not good enough'

How does that feel compared to the first statement?

Negativity's got talent

Imagine singing the thought. For example, sing your 'negative thought' in your mind to your favourite tune. It can be difficult to take negative statements seriously when they're e.g. in the tune of Barbie Girl. When you've had enough, hit the red buzzer!

Cartoon voices

Imagine your favourite cartoon character, e.g. Bugs Bunny saying a negative statement to you. Attach this thought to the cartoon voice and repeat it whenever it comes to mind.

Sky and clouds

Look at the sky and notice the clouds moving slowly. Think of your mind as the sky, and the clouds as your thoughts. Allow them to pass.

Leaves in the river

Sit with your eyes closed. Imagine a river flowing as you watch the water pass by. Each time a thought (whether helpful or unhelpful) comes to mind, place the thought on a leaf and put it in the river. Watch it drift away.

The mind bully

When you are having unhelpful thoughts, note that you are not going to allow them to have power over you. Instead, when you take attention away from them they shrink and lose all their strength.

Thanks mind!

Rather than working the thought, simply thank your mind for any unhelpful thoughts as a response.

Name the story

Give your thoughts/feelings a title and use this to distance from thoughts, e.g. “ah my mind is telling me the ‘I’m not good enough’ story”

Sell the thought

When having an unhelpful thought, consider how much money it would be worth if you sold it? The smaller the amount, the less helpful the thought is.